

**Testimony in support of S. 414, the NTIA Digital Network Technology Program Act, by Antonio Flores, President & CEO of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities.  
Presented before the Subcommittee on Science, Technology & Space of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation, on Wednesday, February 27, 2002. Presiding: The Honorable Ron Wyden, U.S. Senator**

Senator Wyden and distinguished members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity of appearing before you on behalf of the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, or HACU. I am honored to testify in support of S. 414, the NTIA Digital Network Technology Program Act, introduced by Senator Cleland and Senators Hollings, Stevens, Inouye, and Breaux on February 28, 2001.

HACU represents more than 300 colleges and universities in the United States and Puerto Rico, including more than 200 Hispanic-Serving Institutions, or HSIs. HACU-member institutions enroll more than two-thirds of the 1.5 million Hispanics in higher education today, as well as countless non-Hispanics who enrich the diversity of their fast-growing campus communities. HSIs educate the overwhelming majority of the nation's youngest, fastest-growing, and largest ethnic population. As the champion of Hispanic success in higher education and the national voice of HSIs, HACU is proud to support S. 414.

As the backbone of Hispanic higher education, HSIs are the most important national resource for the education and training of Hispanics and other disadvantaged students across the nation. This fact will only be magnified in the years ahead as the Hispanic population continues to grow faster than any other ethnic community in the country and reaffirms its crucial role in the economic and public life of the nation. HSIs need to be strengthened and expanded proportionate to the rapid growth of the populations they serve, so that our national economic prosperity and social well-being are also strengthened. We are reminded that one of every three new workers joining the national work force is a Hispanic and that this proportion will increase to one of every two workers before the year 2050.

The changing nature of our economy demands that underserved and underrepresented but fast-growing populations be educated and trained at increasingly higher levels for the jobs and leadership roles of the "new economy." Notwithstanding the recent bursting of the dot-com bubble, the high-technology sector continues to expand at the speed of human creativity. Thus, information technologies, telecommunications, and biotechnology, among others, require increasing numbers of workers with very high skills and advanced knowledge that only a quality higher education can provide. For Minority-Serving Institutions (MSIs), including HSIs, S. 414 offers a new and important avenue to meet the educational and human-resource needs of our high-technology driven economy and our increasingly complex democracy.

The "digital divide" is not an empty buzzword, but an unfortunate reality in our nation. While all sectors of society are acquiring greater access to information technology and connectivity to the Internet, the gap between the better educated and those behind them is widening each year; not only in qualitative terms but quantifiably as well. The U.S. Department of Commerce series of reports, "*Falling Through the Net*," and the recently published report, "*A Nation Online: How Americans Are Expanding Their Use of the Internet*," documents the divide between Hispanics and whites and Hispanics and the nation as a whole. The 2000 report, the last reporting on households, tell us that more than one half of U.S. households have

computers and more than four of every ten have Internet access. For Hispanic households, the numbers are only one-third and about two of every ten, respectively.

This same report documents that in 2000 Hispanics make almost 27% less individual use of the Internet than non-Hispanic whites. In the latest report the gap has grown to over 28%. In short, Hispanics are slowly increasing computer and Internet access, but the digital divide between them and the rest of the nation's population is getting worse rather than better.

Examining individual Internet use by age groups enables us to look at the traditional college-age population. In the 2000 report, Hispanics were 32.6 percentage points behind their non-Hispanic white counterparts (65.0%). The 2001 report, focusing on 18-24 year-olds actually in school or college, documents that Hispanics are almost 20% less likely than non-Hispanic whites to have a home computer and almost 25% less likely to use the Internet at home. This report highlights the importance of this bill and the importance of supporting our HSIs because the gap between Hispanics and non-Hispanic whites lessens to 15% when one considers outside home use, which for these students overwhelmingly means the school or college. The 15% gap is still large, but it is a sign of progress in the right direction. Similar patterns exist for ages 3 to 17 years. The 2000 report shows substantially large gaps between non-Hispanic whites and Hispanics overall. The latest 2001 report underlines strongly that S. 414 would help to bridge the widening digital divide for our youth by increasing their access to technology in the school setting.

S. 414 may have the greatest impact on this very age group. It is also important to keep in mind that the social and economic impact of the digital divide relates to more than just physical access. It also involves skill in the use of information technology, especially in ways that help one to learn, gather information, critically analyze data, and generate new knowledge and understanding. It is in these qualitative areas where S. 414 will directly strengthen HSIs and other MSIs, so that they may provide the *quality* education needed for the information age and the new economy. This support would empower these crucial institutions to develop and offer a strategic solution to the digital divide.

This hearing was postponed because of acts of terror. Our best defense against such acts is building a strong union by bridging those things that divide us. The technology gap threatens to exacerbate an already existing gap in economic and political opportunity for the Hispanic community. Technology can be a powerful tool to bring us together, but it can also be another source of division. Those without access to technology and facility in using it will be unequipped to contribute to or benefit from the knowledge economy. S. 414 would alleviate significantly this growing economic divide by providing a means for the technological "have-nots" to participate more fully in the ongoing technological revolution, in the economic growth it is driving, and in the strongly united community that can result.

For all the above reasons, HACU and HSIs applaud and support your efforts to start the long-neglected process of strengthening the technological infrastructure and institutional capacity of MSIs for the good of the nation. S. 414 presents a great opportunity for the U.S. Congress and the President to ensure that future generations of Hispanics and other disadvantaged populations do not remain stagnated at the bottom of America's educational ladder. The digital divide, as significant as it is, is but a manifestation of the persistent educational divide that is putting our nation at risk.